

Street Density

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Density:

proximity,

anonymity, intensity,

convergence, overlap, congestion, friction,

suffocation.

All of the above.

In the edge territories of cities where jobs are always hard to come by and incomes are always over-stretched, it would be impossible to sustain lively street economies without density. Street entrepreneurs of various guises, whether on the pavement or in the shop, whether turning a trick, selling a bag of rice or fixing a phone, need people - and a lot of them - to make trade viable. It's why street transactions often go hand-in-hand with transport routes and interchanges. These are the amplifiers in the circuits of buying and selling; they ramp up the volume, they proliferate proximity, they convene convenience. The Internet also assembles density, converging online interests and virtual desires on an object, conversation or service. But for the most part, trade in the edge territories is about the physicality of what you can buy for a fair price and how much of it you can carry on your way home. Carefully placed amongst the density of the opportune are the spaces of enchantment and absolution: hair

and nail bars, churches, massage parlours, street food, mosques, temples, libraries. They provide the tempered rhythms of density, the reprieve inside intensity.

All the huff and puff of planning for cultural and economic vitality that occupies a western imagination of town centres and high streets is about a paraphernalia devoid of density: signage, tree-planting, place-branding, arts-led regeneration, meanwhile spaces. Density requires an overlap of public services and public imagination, like libraries and health centres, and an entirely different model of taxation for the self-employed working poor that doesn't look like rates. For the past ten years, I've explored street economies across the de-industrial peripheries of Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester, London and Manchester. I acknowledge that it's hardly a comprehensive list, but one dull piece of advice I'd offer for the survival of street-life in urban parts of the UK, is to make bus fares more affordable. Buses are part of the rudimentary compendium of urban density required for people across a wide age range to regularly access place, a threshold without which street economies struggle. In a city like London, it's possible to measure the sharp spike in street activity when students come out of school. And then the high street in a place like Rye Lane in Peckham south London is all about bus stops and meal deals, about hanging out and checking out. Free bus travel for under 18s and over 60s is core to the particular densities of Rye Lane. But try and catch a bus from the centre of Leicester to Curry Mile and back, and you're in for a few pounds. The point is that for the kind of density connected to street life and livelihoods to work, we need to think about affordability. Density as reach; density as convenient and quotidian.

This is one part of the story of street livelihoods in edge territories that needs telling, but there is another part of the same story of density that is more pernicious. It's a way of understanding density also as the convergence of damage. When we undertook our street fieldwork from 2015 to 2017, it was apparent how the urban peripheries of Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester and Manchester were being subjected to a state beating. Public services had been drastically cut and the sustained assault on public welfare by austerity governance was palpable. Some proprietors reflected on their recent redundancies from wage labour and hence their shift to self-employment. Their changing trajectory of work not only speaks to the notable national growth in self-employment as well as casualisation from 2011 onwards, but to how this disproportionately affects 'Black and Ethnic Minority' groups. In Bristol and

Birmingham we also witnessed hundreds of adults queuing on the street at lunchtime, hungry and waiting to be fed in spaces of street care set up outside of the state.

Our research period also intersected with a UK General Election and a Brexit Referendum, both of which rode on the crest of anti-immigration rhetoric. The force of a racist and punitive migration system - intentionally hostile in its impact - was ushered in by the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, establishing the structures and atmospheres of everyday bordering that prevail in the edge territories of UK cities. A passport is now required to partake in a rental arrangement, register a child for school, or visit a GP surgery. The Home Office has felt compelled to run a number of alarming deportation experiments brandished in public space, and police provide escort to a mounting increase in fascist marches across these cities. In London we witnessed an additional layer of damage, via the exponential growth in property values following the 2008 financial crisis and with it a state-market compact that fuels speculation via regeneration. In Rye Lane single shops became rapidly sub-divided into multiple shops by traders with a head lease. In their struggle to pay rising rents by densifying the square-meter activation of shop space, new tenure and social arrangements emerged. These accommodate differing social requirements for space, starting from the rental of chair per week for hair and nail stylist. Despite the imagination at play, here density speaks to the marketisation of slithers of space and time, and a progressive shrinking of available space in relation to cultural experimentation outside of the circuits of privilege.

Density is about an intense overlap of provision, disciplining and appropriation.

Density is about a public imagination large enough to consider a small, free bus ticket.

Density is about reconfigurations agile enough to keep pace with the shrinking of space.

Density is about a convergence of structural damage in place that suffocates people.